

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Sermon

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Safeguarding Sunday

All Saints' Marseille

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So how are you feeling about today being designated Safeguarding Sunday? If you find the subject difficult, you're not alone. In general, we don't like bad news stories. It's uncomfortable to be confronted by other people's pain. Who wants to hear about scandals affecting organisations or people that we love? It's often easier to turn away. But what if I said there may be a silver lining to the cloud that's been hanging over the Church for many years? For this morning's opening hymn, I almost chose *God is working his purpose out*. What if, in the midst all that mess, God is showing his Church a better way to be?

We know only too well how cover-ups happen. From large corporations and governments to public sector organisations like social services and the NHS, when they're threatened, members close ranks. Whistle-blowers who dare to raise their heads above the parapet are severely punished. The Church has been no exception. At the highest levels, incriminating evidence has been withheld from the police for decades. The Church, like so many organisations, has been concerned with safeguarding, yes - but with safeguarding its self-image.

In his book *Falling Upwards*, the Franciscan priest and spiritual director, Richard Rohr, discusses the changes we may go through as we mature, among them, shedding the false personas we create in order to protect ourselves. The self-images we project to the rest of the world are not, as the psalmist says, our *inmost being*; knit together in our mothers' wombs. Rohr reminds readers of the Samaritan woman at the well. Christ tells her: *'those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become*

in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' As a Church, our mission is to help each other to access that life-giving wellspring. So Richard Rohr has an important personal prayer: he asks to have at least one daily humiliation so that he doesn't get dragged into pride. Growing consciousness of who we truly are will bring us closer to our creator, but it can be a painful process as we peel back the layers to discover things that disturb us. In a similar way, our Church may be going through what seems difficult, but is, in fact, a very positive time. As failings have come to light the Church has been learning profound lessons of humility.

Last year more than 3000 churches took part in Safeguarding Sunday. We've learned, like so many caring organisations, the Scouts and care homes to mention just two, people with bad intentions seek us out. We need to be on our guard. We know we're not perfect and there are manipulative people who do all they can to hide their intentions. But we also realise our duty to do everything possible to ensure that we keep our church families safe.

This is so vital because, of all places, a church should be a place where we feel absolutely secure – a refuge where we can open our hearts to God when we feel especially vulnerable. This morning I could have read out the testimony of a church abuse survivor. Her account of what happened is just too harrowing, particularly the attempt to end her own life, so I'll only read what she says about her childhood experience, looking back on it from her adult perspective:

That six-year-old girl is me, a now 42-year-old teacher and mother. On the surface, I look like I've got it all – a nice house, a loving husband, beautiful children, and a career I'm passionate about, but my demons still haunt me every day. The lasting effects of the abuse I suffered will never leave me. The flashbacks, the nightmares, the high anxiety, the lack of self-worth, the emotional hurt, the guilt, the shame, the physical pain – they're all there every day. I have weekly therapy, which allows me to function and enjoy the wonderful things in life I've been blessed with.

Have I lost my faith? No. Do I take my children to church? Sadly, I don't. I feel the Church let me down. I'm not angry with the Church, but I do want to know that the Church has moved forward and that everyone within a church community helps to protect children and prevent abuse. Don't turn a blind eye or assume someone else will act – do something. What would Jesus do? He would have talked, listened, challenged, and stood up for what is right. Reach out and be that voice for that scared six-year-old.

Failure to protect can lead to profound spiritual hurt. And of course, we're not only talking about child abuse. We only have to think of recent revelations about elderly people preyed upon by so-called 'helpful friends' in order to access their bank accounts. So how should we reach out and be the voice that the victim would like to hear? When there's boring administrative stuff to deal with, when Safeguarding Officers ask for checks and ask us to fill in forms, what does our faith tell us? Very early on in the life of the Church, Saint Paul was clear: *Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves (Romans 15.1).*

It might feel awkward if, when we volunteer at church, we have to go through a number of checks. We know that doing so won't always unmask potential abusers. But these checks do discover and deter, and online training, learning how and where abuse takes place, helps chaplaincy volunteers to spot the signs, and pick up on potential risks. Training sensitises us to situations we may now see as 'not quite right'. Knowing how to contact the chaplaincy Safeguarding Officer in case of concerns means that we become a safer place for all. We must make every effort to ensure that the 42-year old mother feels her local church is sufficiently safe that she will dare to walk back in, and allow her children to learn about the gospel.

Jesus was clear about the dangers of mission. When he commissioned the twelve apostles he said: *'I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as wise as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard'*. We doves must, of course, be warm and welcoming. St Paul says in Romans 14 that we mustn't *'put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way'*. But as he also warns in 1 Corinthians 8, *'take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak'*. When we know the risks and put into place all the safeguards we can, we're helping both potential victims and their abusers.

We are, as Paul reminds us, *all one body*. In a short while, as Roxana breaks the Host, we'll say together: *Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread*. That passage from Corinthians continues: *If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.*

Just now we sang Jesus' words: *Love one another as I have loved you*. The new commandment reads:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’

This is the bottom line, and when we truly love, we care, and we protect.

Amen.

If you have found any of the content of this sermon upsetting and would like to receive any pastoral care, please don't hesitate to contact one of the ministry team.

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